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PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LXI

JANUARY 1968 TO DECEMBER 1968

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DEIGHTON BELL
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*Published for the Cambridge Antiquarian Society (incorporating the Cambs and Hunts
Archaeological Society) by Deighton Bell, 13 Trinity Street, Cambridge*

Printed in Great Britain at the University Printing House, Cambridge

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A NEOLITHIC HUT AND FEATURES AT LITTLE PAXTON, HUNTINGDONSHIRE

GRANVILLE T. RUDD

DURING the early summer of 1967, work was begun on the improvements to the A 1 road between Hail Bridge (a mile NNW of St Neots) and Southoe, Huntingdonshire. The line of the new dual carriageway cuts straight across cultivated land to the west of the existing road, by-passing the large curve between Hail Bridge and a point north of Little Paxton. Since scattered surface finds of worked flints had been made in the area involved, it was decided to keep a watch on the work as it progressed. This was undertaken at the request of the Ministry of Public Building and Works.

Once the heavy earth-moving equipment used by the contractors to remove the topsoil began to operate, features were soon revealed as dark areas showing in the light, sandy subsoil. Almost all these features were clustered in a strip some 300 ft long, almost opposite the point on the existing road where it is joined by Little Paxton Lane (TL/183627). The plan of the site (Fig. 1) shows the features strung out in

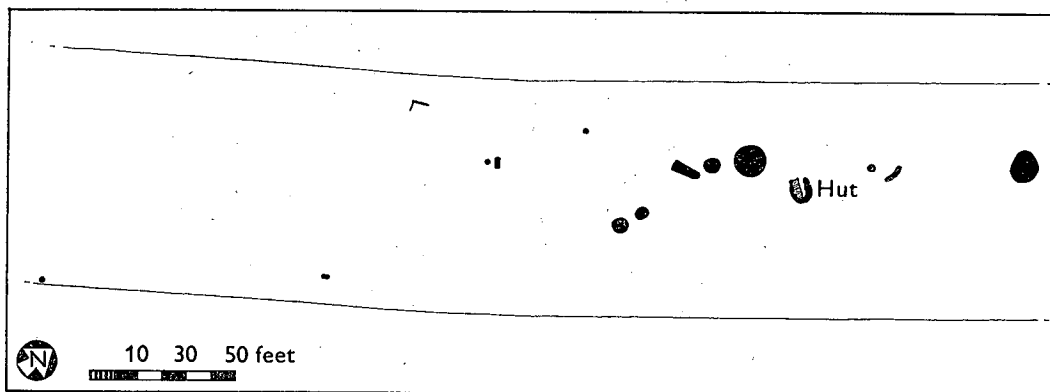


Fig. 1. Plan of features revealed by road works west of Little Paxton Lane.

a line down the centre of the scraped area. This apparent concentration may well be due to the comparatively undamaged surface of the scraped area along the centre of the strip, for the heavy scrapers and other machinery constantly ran up and down on either side of the cutting, to avoid the survey pegs along the central area. However, nothing was noticed in the sides of the cutting even when freshly scraped, although the alarming speed at which the earth was stripped off would have meant that shallow features could have been destroyed without ever being seen.

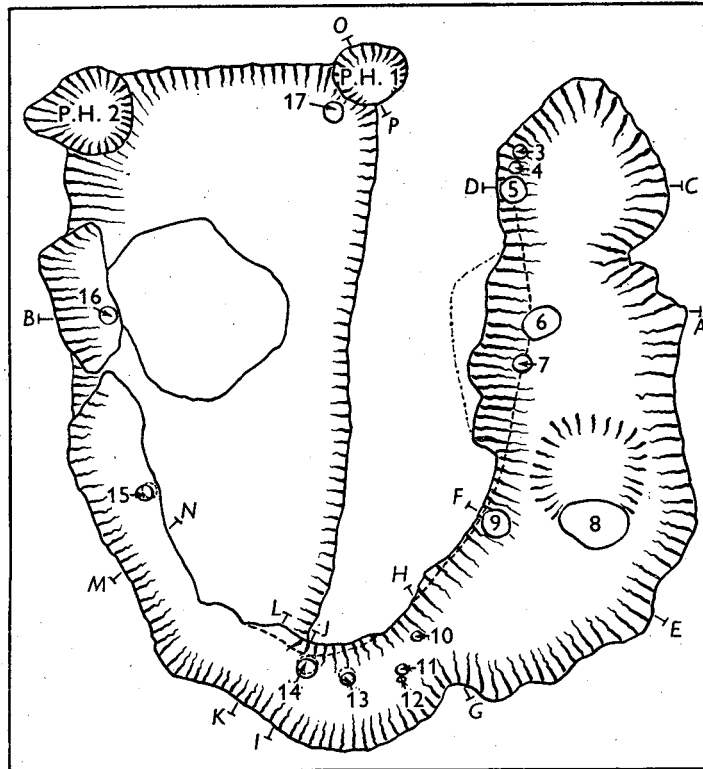
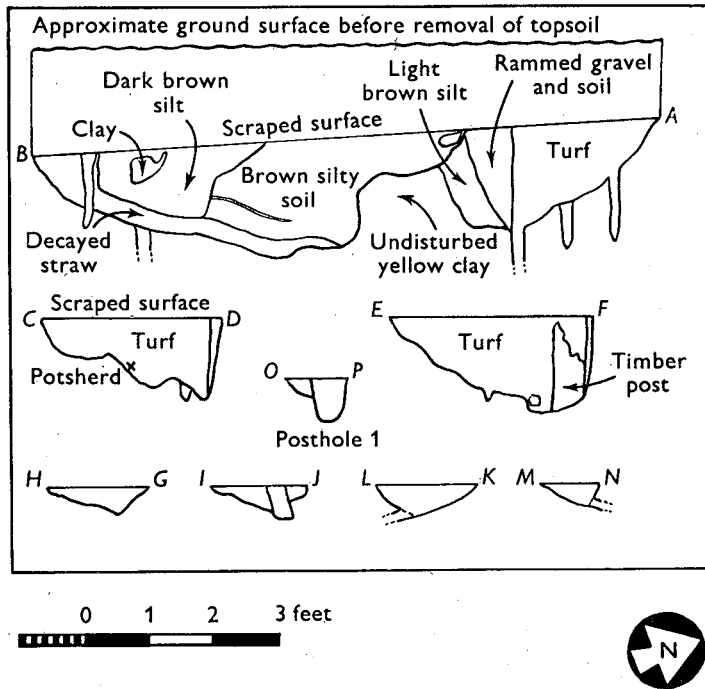


Fig. 2. Cross sections and plan of Neolithic hut, Little Paxton Lane.

Since we had a very limited time to excavate the site, it was decided to investigate the most promising of the features as fully as possible and only to spend what time we had left on the others. Having cut small trial holes in the large circular features, we found that they were shallow, with a homogeneous black fill apparently sterile of finds. A horse-shoe shaped feature near the centre of the complex seemed the most likely to yield information quickly.

When the surface of this feature was cleaned, it showed itself to be D-shaped, with the straight side marked by postholes, and the curved sides bounded by an irregular trench filled with a very dark, slightly fibrous material (see plan, Fig. 2). Almost certainly it represented a structure, most probably a small hut. The south side, the bottom of the D, seemed very slight in comparison with the north side, until it was noticed that the ground surface had been scraped off to a deeper level at this point. Sections cut across the northern half of the trench showed that the dark fill, probably decayed turf, had a vertical face on the inside, with a foundation trench against it filled with rammed gravelly soil, and with the turf supported in places with stakes driven through it into the gravel below. An earlier feature, perhaps a small pit, in the middle of the north side, had been cut through by the foundation trench. Its soft, light brown silty fill had caused the edge of the trench to fall in when being dug, so at this point the foundation trench widens out on the inside, and the turf wall is reinforced with larger stakes or posts. The sections cut through the trench on the southern side showed that the ground had been scraped too low to allow the vertical edge of the turf to be seen, but the general features of the fill appeared the same. The inside edge of the trench was not so clear to follow as it had been on the northern half of the feature; for here it was bounded by a dark, muddy soil, only distinguishable from the trench fill by its texture, while below this, a black layer—like the turf, but of a more open texture—sloped downwards towards the middle of the feature. This open-textured fill I interpreted as decayed hay or straw. Finally a section (*A-B* on the hut plan) was cut right across the hut to determine the relationship of this layer to the wall on the north side. This cutting showed that the southern half of the floor had been dug away to a depth of 12–15 in., leaving a raised ‘bench’ or shelf, some 2 ft. wide, running the length of the hut from the entrance along the north side. The lower part of the floor had apparently been covered with a thick layer of straw, possibly for a bed. Afterwards, a 6-in. layer of dark soil had been deposited over the straw, and a second layer of straw was laid over this. Then later, the level of the whole floor was raised by a thick layer of the same dark soil, covering both the lower floor area and the ‘bench’. Finally, probably after the hut had been abandoned, an irregular pit had been dug inside against the south wall to the depth of the original straw layer.

The hut had been strongly built, with turf walls on three sides from 18 in. to 2 ft. thick, and supported by posts and stakes. The entrance was at the north-west corner, leading on to the ‘bench’. The remainder of the west wall, the straight side of the D, is marked by two large postholes, between which the floor finished on a straight line, showing that some form of thin material, perhaps boards or skins, had filled

the space between the posts. Excavation of the stake holes supporting the walls showed that they had been pushed outwards by the thrust of the roof radially from the large post in the centre of the west wall. Thus there seem to have been rafters radiating from this post, sloping to the turf walls and fastened to the supporting stakes. The roof must presumably have been heavy to warrant such sturdy walls on so small a structure, and may well have been also of turf. Internal dimensions of the hut were approximately 9 ft. along its longer axis, and about 6 ft. across.

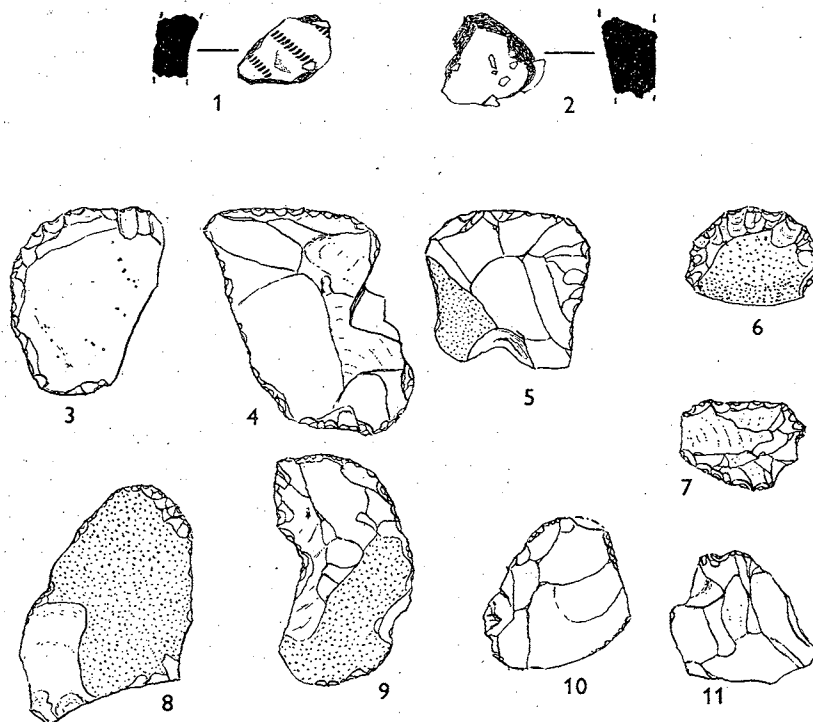


Fig. 3. Neolithic potsherds (1, 2) and flints from the site at Little Paxton Lane. Scale $\frac{3}{8}$.

For dating evidence for the structure we have to rely on the only fragment of pottery found in a stratified position, a tiny fragment of a Peterborough ware pot, decorated with oblique whipped-cord 'maggots', in reddish brown ware with coarse flint temper; it was found in the foundation trench lying on the natural gravel below the turf (Figs. 2 and 3, no. 1). A similar sherd, but undecorated (Fig. 3, no. 2), and a number of worked flints, mostly crude scrapers (Fig. 3, nos. 3-11), were all found lying on the scraped surface nearby. No artifacts of any other period were found.

Since the excavation of the hut took longer than was expected, there was no time for detailed exploration of the other features. A cursory investigation confirmed that the large, circular feature, 15 ft. south-west of the hut, was 13 ft. in diameter and only 1 ft. deep. Nothing was found to indicate its use or date. The feature next to the hut on the north could perhaps have been a second D-shaped hut. A lightly built

rectangular structure, its walls traced by sleeper-beam slots, was noted some 150 ft. south-west of the hut; the fill of these slots was very different from that of the other features, and may well have been much later in date.

My thanks are due especially to Mr C. Daines, who did much of the hard work, and to the Resident Engineer and contractors on the site for their help and co-operation.

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